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Everyone will benefit from a judicial district change

A May 3 Letter to the Editor from Theresa Ellender, a former candidate for the Legislature, misrepresents my effort to uphold the civil rights of Terrebonne's voters and demonstrates why the black community has repeatedly looked outside of their own parish for representation.

This session, I introduced House Bill 861 – a proposal for a majority-black sub-district for Terrebonne's 32nd Judicial District Court. I did so because no member of Terrebonne's delegation responded to a federal court ruling finding that the system for electing state judges in Terrebonne is unlawful. Local legislative members' inaction continues a racially discriminatory 20-year pattern of opposition from white officials — the very behavior that got the court to rule for Terrebonne's citizens.

Contrary to Ellender's assertion, I was not "recruited by Terrebonne NAACP leadership" to introduce this bill. Rather, it's my charge as the Louisiana Legislative Black Caucus's chair to protect voting rights statewide and ensure that minority voters have an equal opportunity to elect their preferred candidates.

President Barack Obama's election did not lead us into a post-racial era of politics. For Ellender to assert otherwise demonstrates a willful blindness to the discrimination that continues to exist. Look no further than Terrebonne. In the 2008 and 2012 elections, President Obama received no more than 13 percent of Terrebonne's white voter support. This is consistent with the fact that for over 20 years, black candidates, regardless of the office sought or their party affiliation, have never received more than 10 percent of white voter support in Terrebonne. This is not because black candidates aren't "upstanding," or are "given to vice" or lacking in "qualifications and integrity" – all stereotypes designed to keep black people from having equal opportunities.

Majority-black sub-districts are the proven way for black voters to have a voice in Louisiana's political systems, which have not had a black statewide representative since the late 1800s. The implication that a judge elected in a majority-minority sub-district in Terrebonne would be "handpicked" or "espouse far-left principles and values" insults Terrebonne's black community, which has shown its willingness to vote for a spectrum of candidates from both political parties.

Characterizing civil rights enforcement as a "government handout" is a troubling statement from Ellender, who sought to represent black and white constituents in the 53rd district. A representative must be able to work with colleagues, including those who are black and, thus far, have all been elected from majority-black sub-districts.

State Rep. Randal Gaines

D - LaPlace